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The Growing Chemical Club

Secret intelligence files reveal an alarming spread of chemical-biological weapons around the world. A growing number of Third World nations have joined the "chemical club," which was already dangerous enough when its membership was limited to the two superpowers and their allies.

A recent CIA report, classified "secret," summarizes the threat posed by the expansion of chemical-biological warfare capability this way:

"The past decade has seen an ominous proliferation of chemical weapons acquired by Third World states [which shows a] momentum greater than heretofore appreciated. Soviet military assistance has been a common source and major stimulus to this momentum . . .

"Much of the action has been centered in the Middle East, but other areas—parts of Southeast Asia and the Horn of Africa—are increasingly at risk. The attraction of chemical weapons for Third World forces, combined with a multiplicity of open market sources of chemical materiel, provide further nourishment for this growth. As more nations join the chemical club, a heightened sense of vulnerability is bound to manifest itself. We therefore expect a continued upsurge in chemical warfare activities."

From intelligence sources and a series of secret and top-secret documents, my associate Dale Van Atta has put together the details of the chemical-biological warfare threat:

- Egypt was the first Middle East country to get this type of training, indoctrination and materiel—including nerve gas—from the Soviets. Throughout the 1960s, high-level Egyptian military officers were trained in Moscow at the Red Banner Academy of Chemical Defense. Egypt used poison gas during the 1963 and 1967 Yemen campaigns.

- Iraqi soldiers also got Soviet chemical-biological warfare training in the 1960s. A dozen obstacle courses were set up in Iraq, requiring a small supply of nerve gas and other chemical agents. In 1982, the hard-pressed Iraqis used tear gas effectively to roll back an Iranian offensive, and in 1983-84 they escalated their chemical warfare to include mustard gas and a nerve agent, which decimated Iranian human-wave attacks.

- Ethiopia—itsself a victim of Italian mustard gas in 1936—acquired chemical weapons,

decontamination equipment and training from the Soviets, with Cuban advisers providing follow-up exercises. The Ethiopian army reportedly has used chemical incapacitants and irritants since 1980 against the rebel Eritrean People's Liberation Front.

- Syria has been a major recipient of Soviet chemical warfare aid, and is probably the most advanced Arab country in this grisly military art. The assistance continues to this day.

- Libya is believed to have received Soviet training, but the Russians have been hesitant to supply chemical weapons. Poland may have provided some chemical agents to Libya in 1980.

- Israel, under obvious threat from the stockpiling of chemical weaponry by its Arab neighbors, has acquired chemical-biological capability in response. Only two weeks before the Six Day War of 1967, Israeli intelligence discovered a stockpile of artillery shells loaded with Soviet nerve gas in the Egyptian-held Sinai peninsula. That set off a frantic scramble for protective gear, and led eventually to the existing Israeli stockpiles of nerve and mustard gas supplies, as well as various nonlethal agents used for riot control.

- Thailand, finding itself in a similarly threatened position from its communist neighbors, has been improving its defensive chemical-biological program. It has been buying more and better protective equipment from the United States and other suppliers to counter the potential danger of nerve gas use by the Vietnamese, who have their own stockpiles.

- Taiwan is a special case among members of the chemical club. It has made these weapons a priority since 1979. The Taiwanese war-defense strategy calls for unrestricted counter-attack with chemical weapons whether the invading force uses them or not.

- China apparently suffered chemical attacks by the Soviets in 1969 and by the Vietnamese 10 years later, and has developed a modest offensive capability. U.S. spy satellites have monitored Chinese military exercises that included the firing of chemical artillery shells at "enemy" troop concentrations. Decontamination crews moved in after the barrage. But compared to the chemical weapons arrayed against them across the Soviet border, the Chinese stockpile is militarily insignificant.